



The Narrative Identity of European Cities in Contemporary Literature

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Abstract

This volume aimed to highlight narrative identities of European cities or city neighbourhoods that have been overlooked, such as mid-sized cities. These cities are neither small towns nor metropolises, cities that are now unveiling their appeal or specificity. The present special issue thus covers a range of representations of cities. The articles investigate more systematically how different texts deal with various cities from different experiential and fictional perspectives. The issue covers the geographical scope across Europe, from east to west or vice versa, as well as a range of different works of national literature(s), but with a clear emphasis on mid-sized European cities that have until now been deemed as lesser-known, secondary, peripheral, ‘other’ cities that are in the focus of the research of the COST project Writing Urban Places. New Narratives of the European City, within which this journal issue is being published.

Keywords: narrative, narrative identity, urban representation, European city, European city in literature

Introduction

Narratives of midsized cities are primarily eligible to explore unique and particular urban images. They represent spatial, experiential, perceptive and fluid images of these cities from various perspectives and overwhelm collective assumptions. The fluid images of midsized cities do not predetermine the individual’s/subject’s imagination, and the persona can have

the potential to contribute to the ongoing/fluid/becoming construction of the urban image, by which the experiencing persona remains active and experiences the enduring changes in the urban space over time as positive or negative everyday interventions. Still, the magnitude of these changes by the authorities or individual or private stakeholders becomes more prominent when emphasised in a literary text. When authors accentuate and highlight these changes that the broad audience of the time might overlook, they enter the literary and other cultural heritage. As such, these representations of changes in the built environment and city landscape thus become elements of cultural heritage and collective memory of the city and its community. In a way, the city, in its various and myriad forms of literary representations in urban narratives throughout time, becomes an entity of its own; it changes, develops, grows, and, at the same time, becomes an adequate place for the community's cultural identity to be "read." Identity is, according to Kevin Lynch (1990), something that gives the place its character of individuality or uniqueness.

Furthermore, if true, as Roland Barthes says, "[t]he city is a discourse, and this discourse is a language [and] the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak to our city, the city where we are, simply by inhabiting it, by traversing it, by looking at it," (1994, p. 195). According to Paul Ricoeur (cf. *Time and Narrative*, 1984), the city has its own narrative identity. It can be viewed as the protagonist of its ever-changing narrative. This special issue of NALANS – *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies*, aims to explore the narrative identities of European cities as they have been written in contemporary literature that features the city as its protagonist and as an element equally crucial as, if not even more than, its characters in the traditional sense. In any case, without a doubt, it is one of the crucial elements of the narrative.

The call aimed to highlight narrative identities of European cities or city neighbourhoods that have been overlooked, such as mid-sized cities. These cities are neither small towns nor metropolises, cities that are now unveiling their appeal or specificity. The special issue thus covers a range of individual case studies of cities as well as articles that investigate more systematically how several cities are represented in a particular European region or how several different texts depict one city: Articles that, on the one hand, cover the narrative identity of more than one city include, for example, the analysis of literary texts and cities from the German-speaking area such as Graz and Bielefeld and Ukrainian Fiction narrating the identity of, among others, Kyiv, Rivne, Lviv, Kharkiv. Another pair of articles deals with prose on a single city: contemporary Georgian literature on Tbilisi, recent Nobel laureate Annie Ernaux and her depiction of suburban Cergy-Pontoise in contemporary French literature, and Albanian Fiction by Ismail Kadare on Tirana. On the other hand, we have also included a case study focusing on a single city and text, including an insight into the work of Alberto Pimenta's Porto. The issue thus, indeed, covers the geographical scope across Europe, from east to west or vice versa, as well as a range of different works of national literature(s), but with a clear emphasis on cities that are not metropolises but instead mid-sized European cities that have until now been deemed as lesser-known, secondary, peripheral, 'other' cities that are in the focus of the research of the COST project *Writing Urban Places. New Narratives of the European City*, within which this journal issue is being published.

The issue begins with a *Preface* by our COST Action's Vice-Chair, Susana Oliveira, which is followed by six articles: Tetiana Grebeniuk's article *Reminiscence about the Soviet City: Urban Space in the Ukrainian Fiction of the 21st Century*, Anna-Lena Roderfeld's article entitled *The City is not the City: Two approaches on how city writers compose images of Urbanity*, Salome Pataridze's study entitled *Semantic Function of Spatial Experiences*

and *Memories in The Southern Elephant* by Archil Kikodze and Zinka Adamiani by Ana Kordzaia-Samadashvili, Marisa Kerbizi's article *Urban Places and the Narrative of the Supreme Power*, Antia Monteagudo's paper *From the City of Heroes to the City of „Ilhas“: the Ilhiada* by Alberto Pimenta and Aida Marella's paper titled *Existence and Exteriors: the Narrative Identity of Cergy-Pontoise in Annie Ernaux's Urban Memoirs Exteriors and Things Seen*.

Susana Oliveira's *Preface* leads into the history of the creation of the COST Action *Writing Urban Places. New Narratives of the European City* presents the co-editors of this special issue in the context of the Action. Oliveira's *Preface* also raises the question of centrality versus ex-centricity, much as the Action does and reflects on the condition of the intermediate European cities being the main interest, central urban condition opposing the metropolises which, as Yeats' and Didion's centres, will not, cannot and did not "hold."

Tetiana Grebeniuk's article *Reminiscence about the Soviet City: Urban Space in the Ukrainian Fiction of the 21st Century* offers a review of contemporary representative urban narratives from Ukrainian literature with an attempt to systematise them with regards to the way the texts utilise Soviet "memories as literary devices," as Grebeniuk herself explains. With the first group comprised of texts such as *Klavka* (2019) by Maryna Hrymych or *Sweet Darusia* (2004) by Maria Matios, where the plot is ingrained into the Soviet Ukraine chronotope, the focus of the paper is on the second group of urban narratives that incorporate memories of the Soviet past into present-day Ukraine such as the novel *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets* (2009) by Oksana Zabuzhko, *Amadoka* (2020) by Sofia Andrukhovych, and *Dom's Dream Kingdom* by Victoria Amelina). Grebeniuk thus analyses *Rivne / Rovno (The Wall)* by Oleksandr Irvanets and Victoria Amelina's novel *Dom's Dream Kingdom*, showing "Soviet urban identity as ideologically based, predatory, and intentionally blurring the national and local/urban types of identity" amidst the changes that the Ukrainian urban space underwent during the systematic soviet urban planning policies. Grebeniuk argues that this has resulted in the loss of individuality and uniqueness of urban spatial organisation in Ukraine and is reflected in the literary texts as well if analysed based on Augé's dichotomy of places and non-places.

Anna-Lena Roderfeld, in her article entitled *The City is not the City: Two approaches on how city writers compose images of Urbanity* focuses on *Graz, Alexanderplatz* (2012) by Barbara Marković, and *Die Stadt ist nicht die Stadt* (2019) by Juliana Kálnay. Graz and Bielefeld are the cities illustrated in the two selected and analysed literary texts. Roderfeld's analysis presents the readers with analogous narrative devices, such as the combination of past and present perspectives combined by the recurring motif of the water to demonstrate how the two female authors experienced and acknowledged two discrepant and discordant sets of urban elements through different kinds of urban representation as outcomes. Marković's *Graz, Alexanderplatz* is immediately recognised as an evocation of and textual interplay on Alfred Döblin's iconic *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. However, it is an experimental step away from traditional narrative, giving way to the city to tell its own story by depicting three main squares in the city (Jakominiplatz, Hauptplatz, Griesplatz) over one year. Kálnay's *Die Stadt ist nicht die Stadt* is, on the other hand, a more traditional text describing Bielefeld as a historic centre of the European textile industry in the 19th century intertwined with contemporary city images. Roderfeld thus analyses how these different literary images of the two cities also differ in the urban experience they offer readers.

Salome Pataridze's study entitled *Semantic Function of Spatial Experiences and Memories in The Southern Elephant* by Archil Kikodze and Zinka Adamiani by Ana

Kordzaia-Samadashvili explores the role of spatial concepts in the construction of narrative identity, the impact of changes in historical, social, economic, cultural and worldview conditions on narrative identities of Tbilisi. Pataridze bases her analysis on the methodological framework relying on Juri Lotman's spatial semantics, Pierre Nora's sites of memory, and Aleida Assmann's understanding of memory and forgetting. By employing the three analytical aspects of each of the selected novels – *Southern Elephant* by Archil Kikodze and *Zinka Adamiani* by Ana Samadashvili-Kordzaia – Pataridze concludes that „change of urban space follows the social and political processes and reflects the inner feelings, fears, aspirations of the characters and vice versa, “making the urban space as important a protagonist in an urban narrative as characters themselves, both of them facing „identity disruption. “

Marisa Kerbizi's article *Urban Places and the Narrative of the Supreme Power* questions the utilisation policies or, at times, the misuse of urban spaces to demonstrate the power of the governing regime, altering the identity of the urban space in question to a great extent. Investigating the symbols and symbolism of power as well as their literary representations in contemporary Albanian novels such as *The Pyramid*, *The Ancestor*, *The Palace of Dreams*, and *The Daughter of Agamemnon* by Ismail Kadare, Kerbisi uncovers the explicit and sometimes dramatic relationship between urban transformations of cityscapes in Albania in the communist era and the ideological intentions of the regime in power and correlates them with their interpretations in selected contemporary Albanian novels by identifying renaming of places, the symbolisation of the power's corporeality in space and establishing a system or atmosphere of terror and fear as processes that are present in both the fictional and the “real” urban space.

Aida Marella's paper entitled *Existence and Exteriors: the Narrative Identity of Cergy-Pontoise in Annie Ernaux's Urban Memoirs* *Exteriors and Things Seen* explores the connections between the inner self of the author-narrator and the urban exterior in two contemporary French works of autobiographical prose. Marella's analysis of Ernaux's *Exteriors* and *Things Seen* reveals the depiction of the external suburban dimension as a narrative technique to express the literary subject's internal meaning-making processes, showing how the autobiographical interaction with the New Town of Cergy-Pontoise through the literary text enables self-exploration of the author-narrator on the one hand and supports identity-creation and place-making in Augé's terms on the other. Marella's critical exploration of the selected texts thus highlights the intersection between life and place, suggesting that the identity of Cergy-Pontoise is crafted by and through Ernaux's texts and that, concurrently, the suburban space of the New Town informs Ernaux's own experience of individuality and memory. Ernaux's texts thus reflect the identity of an urban environment and her own experience with it, with descriptions of exteriority becoming a stylistic device informing Ernaux's prose.

Antia Monteagudo's paper *From the City of Heroes to the City of „Ilhas“: the Ilhiada by Alberto Pimenta* reveals how Pimenta's *Ilhiada* is, in actuality, its “polar opposite” as it alludes to Homer's *The Illiad* in a conspicuous intertextual play. Monteagudo explains how Pimenta, in a play of words, i.e., titles, introduces a tale of the “*ilhas*”, a system of urban organisation and type of construction from Porto connected to the lower-income population which became a problem for the city's governing system when trying to brand the city as a tourist destination. The analysis shows both the unique narration of everyday life of the *ilhas* before the urban development processes in Porto as well as its parallel, yet somewhat opposite story of heroic Troy, juxtaposing their polarities such as heroism and dominance

versus subalternity as well as questioning the categories separately both from a sociological standpoint as well as the standpoint of literary studies (e. g. poetry).

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